Charting a Course for Social Protection in Sudan: Bridging Research and Policy

Lena Mahgoub,
Dr Omer Egemi,
Calum McLean.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sudan's modern history has been one of an inequitable and predatory political economy characterised by elite capture of the state and its resources. Power and wealth have been largely concentrated in the capital city of Khartoum creating pronounced development disparities and inequalities between the centre and the peripheries. Gender inequality is apparent where the human development index for women is 0.472 compared to 0.544 for males with the estimated national gross income per capita for women being $1,750 compared to $5,282 for men1. Women also bear a disproportionate burden due to the interplay between conflict, economic inequality, political marginalisation and climate change.

Sudan's post-independence history is one of durable disorder. The profound inequalities between the centre and its diverse and impoverished peripheries reside at the core of country's political instability and violence. The already fragile situation was entrenched and expanded to its limits during the Inqaz regime (1989-2019) where militarized governance constituted by the growth and empowerment of multiple competing centres of security, and political and economic power was established and, together with corrupt transactional politics, were utilized as tools of rule and constituencies to be managed2. Politics of identity, manipulation of tribal institutions and the militarisation of societies in the peripheries added to the increased violence, corruption and the overstretching of institutions and governance structures.

The short-lived Transition that followed the deposing of Inqaz regime in April 2019 has been associated with the emergence and rise of the Rapid Support Forces RSF as one of the main political and economic actors in the country, together with the Juba Peace Agreement signatories. The turbulent, poorly-institutionalized context of the transition, was characterized by political bickering between the military and civilians, increased armament of the RSF, mounting belligerency between SAF and RSF and prevalence of transactional politics with its short-term returns that trumped technocratic institutional governance; all of which combined to culminate in the coup of October 2021 that brought the Transition to an end putting Sudan in profound economic and social instability while setting the stage for the current conflict.

The outbreak of armed conflict between SAF and the RSF in April 2023 has been catastrophic, plunging the country into the most severe humanitarian crisis in its history. The conflict is currently recognised as the world's biggest displacement and humanitarian crisis. Over 12.9 million people (27% of the population) and 30 million people (over 60% of the total population) need lifesaving aid3. From Kordofan to Darfur, it has left civilians trapped, starving and without the basics they need for their survival. The infrastructural base of education, health and water has been smashed to pieces with cholera, measles and other diseases spreading.

The conflict has changed both the nature of vulnerability and who is vulnerable, with ethnicity, gender and age becoming increasingly important factors. Women, who play a central role in the household economy in Darfur and Kordofan, are disproportionately affected. They also face greater challenges accessing markets due to security that increases the threat of gender-based violence. The youth are not only losing opportunities for education and employability; they are also targeted for recruitment into militia or forced to flee the country in search of security and employment opportunities.

The conflict has devastated the livelihoods of most of the population in the country. Production and marketing have been halted, and human capital and state capacity have been destroyed. The country's industrial base has been damaged. The economic activity, including farming, trade, financial, and information and communications technology services, have collapsed with detrimental impacts on food security and livelihood conditions. The banking sector is in a severe crisis, with widespread cash shortages nationwide. Cash-strapped Sudanese are struggling to buy essential items as the inflation rate soars. Skyrocketing inflation rates and the liquidity crisis have led to the Sudanese currency (SDG) to become a commodity of speculation with differentials between liquid cash and digital cash, and with the

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[1] *United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 2023, UNDP*

[2] *Gallopin, Jean-Baptiste; Eddie Thomas, Sarah Detzner and Alex de Waal, 2021, Sudan's Political Marketplace in 2021, The London School of Economics and Political Science, Conflict Research Programme and World Peace Foundation*

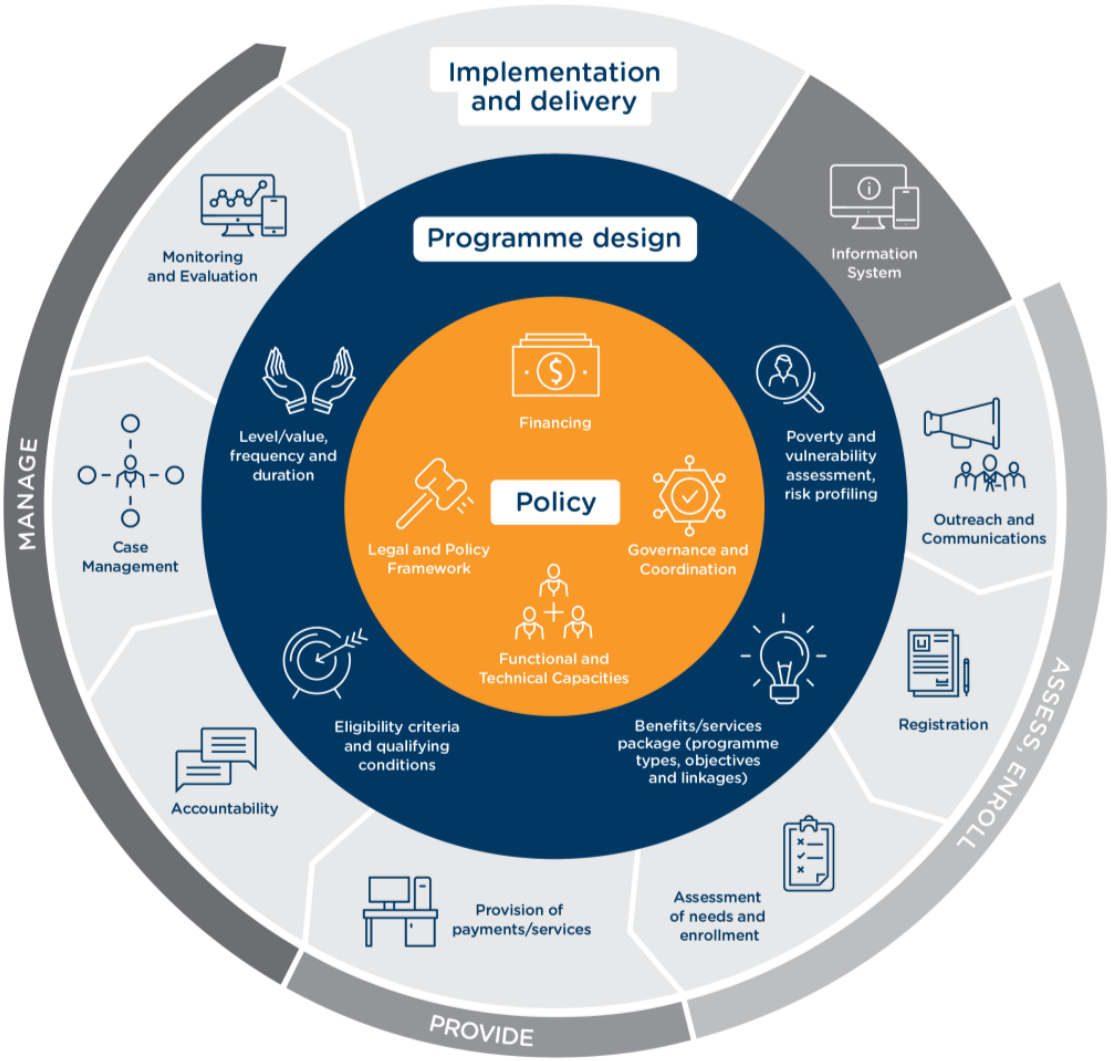
[3] *OCHA, A call to action for protection and accountability for the people of Sudan, 12th June 2025, OCHA-Sudan<ochasudan@un.org*

introduction of new currency notes, between the old and new SDG, therefore exerting more pressure on the already impoverished population.

1.1 State of the Social Protection Landscape

The formal social protection system in the country has been in disarray over the past decades. This involves limited coverage, presence of multiplicity of poorly coordinated government structures, limited institutional capacities and limited funding; all of which are deeply rooted in the lack of a clear vision and the prevalence of socially irresponsive governance. The Zakat Chamber, the main provider of social protection interventions in the country suffered enormous challenges including, among many others: (i) lack of a clear national social protection policy; (ii) difficulty maintaining independence and the influence of ruling regimes on the Chamber's priorities; (iii) confused role between social protection and religious obligations; and (iv) the massive knowledge gap as pertaining to poverty and vulnerability.

Figure 1. The main social protection instruments are expressed as a 'solar' system[4]



The development of the first National Social Protection Strategy NSPS (2022–2023) marked a pivotal shift in social protection approach, moving from fragmented, needs-based assistance to a rights-based, universal framework. This transformation places social protection at the heart of building a free, just, and

4 Barca, V., Jaramillo Mejia, J.G. (2023) 'Social Protection as a 'Solar' System', Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice and Resources (STAAR), DAI Global UK Ltd, United Kingdom

peaceful society. Central to this vision is the recognition that social protection is not a privilege but a fundamental state obligation and a right for all citizens. However, the implementation of the strategy was halted by the governance vacuum since the military takeover in October 2021 and which led many donors to suspend support to the Government, who effectively became perceived as a 'De Facto' authority from that point, run by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). The eruption of the conflict has further led to the paralysis of state institutions with social protection mandate, such as the Ministry of Social Development, the Zakat Chamber, the Pension Fund, and others. This is in addition to the huge social costs of the conflict and the resultant huge demands for social protection under conditions of intensified national economic crisis and institutional disruption.

INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL PROTECTION IN SUDAN

Constituted by the Prime Ministerial Decree No. 70 of 2019, the Ministry of Labour and Social Development (MoLSD) is the main institution responsible for social protection, policies in the country. The MoLSD includes four units that are directly related to social protection, supervising the policies of two banks while residing over the mandate of four related councils:

Figure 2: Governmental Institutional Structure of Social Protection in Sudan 2020

MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
Main Units Directly related to Social Protection
Policy Supervision
Councils
Commision for Social Safety and Poverty Reduction (CSSPR)
National Health Insurance Fund
Zakat Fund
National Pension and Social Insurance Fund (NPSIF)
Humanitarian Aid Commission
Savings and social Development Bank
Family Bank
National Council for Child Welfare (NCCW)
National Council for Persons with Disability
Supreme Court for Vocational Training and Apprenticeship
Combatting Violence Against Women and Children Unit
National Agency for Graduate Employment
National Association for Assistive Devices for persons with Disability

Source: Based on data from *Social protection in Sudan— system overview and programme mapping*[5]

The conflict has led to the collapse or discontinuation of many humanitarian, development and social protection programs. These include the National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS), including the World Bank-funded Sudan Social Safety Net Project (SSNP) and Sudan Family Support Program (SFSP) that provided cash transfers to vulnerable families. With the economy in tatters and a loss of employment, many families have been dependent on cash transfers from abroad. However, as the majority of those who fled abroad have lost their assets, their ability to continue this form of support is diminishing. The

[5] *Bilo, C et al Social protection in Sudan— system overview and programme mapping. IPG-IG (2020)*

disruption of the banking system itself also means that in many areas there is no cash in circulation, underscoring the importance of humanitarian cash assistance as a response to the crisis.

The ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis have exposed gaps in the capacity of national institutions. While these institutions remain crucial for scalability and sustainability, they are currently unable to work across all the areas of control and therefore lack the reach to support all those in need. This underscores the indispensable role of humanitarian actors, who are not mere stopgaps but essential partners in ensuring continuity of care, expanding access, and upholding human dignity during emergencies.

Overview of Social Protection Programmes (2019)

Programme	Main Benefits	Coverage	Targeting Mechanism
Cash Transfers	Since 2019: SDG400	1 million households in 2019	Proxy Means Test (PMT)
Shamel	Water Projects Livelihoods Community Awareness School Feeding Health Interventions	59,684 households 334,684 households 346,504 households 158,067 households	Communities based on project proposals; Individuals: Community-Based Targeting (CBT)
Zakat	Cash and in-kind transfers, microfinance	2.3 million households (2018)	PMT based on Zakat Poverty Census(ZPC).
National Pension and Social Insurance Fund (NPSIF)	Old age, injury, disability, death, grant, loans & microfinance to prevent poverty.	Private Sector (2019): 427,000 insured employees & 142,000 retirees. 9,143 ppl benefited from social welfare projects (2019) Government Sector (2019): 688,050 insured employees & 191,000 retirees	Mandatory for public and private sector employees, other support services, based on needs.
National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF)	Health insurance (contributory & non-contributory modality)	27 million individuals (68% of pop.)	Through other programmes such as Zakat & Pension Funds; it is mandatory for the formal sector
National Students Welfare Fund (NSWF)	Sponsorships, loans, housing, welfare programmes	Loans: 13,000 students Sponsorships: 40,950 students Social Welfare Programmes: 148,438 students	Selection by a social worker

Source: Social protection in Sudan— system overview and programme mapping. IPC-IG (2020)

1.2 Charting a Way Forward

With the purpose of charting a course for social protection in Sudan that will bridge the gap between research and policy, facilitate dialogue among key stakeholders, and contribute to developing a shared

vision for social protection in Sudan, this conference took place from 21-22nd May 2025 in Nairobi, organised by the Rift Valley Institute.

It brought together over 40 predominantly Sudanese experts on social protection, humanitarian assistance and the private sector (see Annex 1). A particular concern was to create a safe environment where participants could discuss complex and sometimes charged issues and to think creatively about what a re-imagined social protection could look like in the current context of Sudan: in short, to create a Sudanese-led vision for the future of social protection in the country.

To this end, recent research and knowledge of the past social protection system and its vestiges in the current time were considered and analysed to see what could be learned and applied in the current reality. This led to conversations about the protracted crisis, the pervasive and predatory political economy that is feeding the conflict, and lessons from conflict-sensitive programming. Examples from Somalia and Yemen were and private sector actors such as Auxfin, fed in, to free up thinking as we started to look forward with the development of a set of principles and using a Foresight technique that laid the skeleton of a potential roadmap to be taken up in the future.

2. CONFERENCE OUTCOMES, EMERGING ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As has been explained in Section 1, the volatile political landscape, conflict dynamics, displacement, bureaucratic impediments, access, and connectivity are just a few of the factors that make delivery very challenging in Sudan. Humanitarian cash assistance is providing much-needed emergency relief but delivery at scale has become inadvertently prevented by the political economy of the conflict and the absence of a system to coalesce around. The national social protection system has almost totally collapsed, most notably the termination of the Sudan Family Support Programme, and the surviving remnants such as UNICEF's MCCT+ are externally financed, only operate in SAF-controlled areas or schemes like pensions or zakat are so highly instrumentalised by a clientelist state that they serve no developmental purpose. There is an urgent need to fund interventions that make the enabling environment more permissive and to advocate for protecting the flow of social assistance to people in need in all areas of the country and to move beyond the limits of humanitarian assistance.

The following summarises suggestions made at the conference for working differently to adapt orthodox social protection approaches to the current and potential future scenarios.

2.1 The Policy Space

The Sudanese social protection policy space has been devastated by the displacement caused by the war. The establishment of a protected space for Sudanese experts to come together to set the agenda for renewed and reimagined social protection, and to allow Sudan's experts and academic community to set the agenda for a future system. This should see a Sudanese-led process that can attract funding from a more coordinated donor community.

A re-imagined social protection system needs to be inclusive and operate throughout Sudan in a way that achieves equal outcomes for all people being served. Exclusion of different communities in Sudan has been a major driver of the current civil war, particularly seen in the extractive economy benefiting the centre over the periphery of the country. It is imperative that this pattern is not followed by a social protection programme. An inclusive system needs to be put in place that is equitable to all communities, ethnicities in the country, together with gender and social inclusion practices, including vulnerable groups such as people living with disabilities. The World Bank needs to technically engage in this space, to try to identify scalable solutions in Sudan that don't have to be owned by the federal government.

2.2 A Break from Orthodoxy and Embracing Local Solutions

A renewed social protection system that is domestically led and implemented requires a concerted shift to support local organisations. It is clear that an orthodox national social protection system led by a central government cannot work in the current context. A more localised and decentralised system will need to be established and be able to navigate de facto authorities operating in different areas of control. Lessons from similar contexts can be helpful in rethinking how to operate in fragmented countries with conflicting parties and volatile economic and financial environments. In Yemen, for example, the social protection system is implemented by a national institution that is independent of government/ de facto authorities but is able to deliver social assistance to millions of people across political divides for the last 15 years of civil war. In this example, the Yemeni Rial has effectively become two currencies with different exchange values; a situation that could happen in Sudan.

While there is no equivalent institution in Sudan that could replicate the Yemen example, a number of local organisations, well embedded in different areas of the country, could provide a similar function. Many of these, such as the Emergency Response Rooms (ERR) have been active as first responders to support conflict-affected people and communities, and in many cases would be well placed to adapt programmes in line with longer-term social assistance. Care should be taken to avoid undermining these local structures which can happen with externally driven funding and priorities. Of equal importance is the need to develop the system to be people-centred and driven rather than supply-oriented that meets the needs of external agencies and donors.

Decentralised state-level authorities offer opportunities for engagement. In the context of the collapse of the formal system, there is a tendency to follow orthodox approaches by seeking to support any kind of emergent national government. What is left of the government is fully instrumentalised by the SAF and can only operate in areas that it controls. Local authorities that continue to function in different areas of control may offer opportunities to enable an environment conducive to local organisations providing social assistance.

2.3 Planning, Design and Implementation Challenges

A new social protection system will need to be tailored according to the different contexts on the ground. The political, economic and environmental context varies considerably across Sudan, often reflecting historical exclusion, such as in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains. The conference identified four sub-national areas that are defined by political/ military control but also on characteristics bound up with history, ethnicity and environment. Arguably, many more sub-contexts could be described; however, for the sake of simplicity, these areas could be used to tailor responses and how a social protection system might be designed: SAF-held, RSF-controlled, SPLM-N (Al-Hilu), and JEM/SLA-AW (Abdulwahid).

A **foresight and strategic planning session** was designed to explore innovative, responsive, and context-specific approaches to social protection (see Annex 2 for more details). This forward-looking strategic planning session challenged conventional humanitarian planning, offering a shift toward adaptive, locally grounded approaches to social protection in Sudan's fractured landscape. The session convened 45 experts, practitioners, and humanitarian actors to co-develop actionable strategies, balancing short-term response with long-horizon planning.

Key insights pointed to differentiated approaches by territory and highlighted the importance of localized, community- led approaches such as mobile cash in RSF zones, ID-linked public works in SAF areas, climate-adaptive agricultural vouchers in SPLM-N regions, Emergency Response Rooms (ERR), community kitchens and mutual aid groups. Positive signals such as mobile banking expansion, solar micro grids, and community-led service delivery are opportunities to capitalise on, while negative signals—HAC access restrictions, tribal conflict, and youth militia recruitment—underscore rising risk. Systemic gaps were also identified, including limited, climate-blind programming, and funding shortfalls. Biometric exclusion in some areas, aid taxation in others and GBV risks further compound the humanitarian crisis.

A key overarching insight is that Sudan's polycrisis demands parallel planning for both fragmentation and cohesion futures. This analysis shows how strategic foresight can bridge immediate action with longer-term resilience building in complex crises. The zone-based approach provides pragmatic entry points and a structure for iterative response.

2.4 Donor Coordination

Donor coordination is poor, lacks strategic direction and allows the fragmented humanitarian and social assistance programming to continue. This is partly due to the conflict and the relocation of donors out of Sudan, and the nature of the humanitarian response which tends to be short-term and project based. Development donors and partners are not engaging sufficiently, serving to increase competition between WFP and UNICEF to win contracts that only deliver in SAF held areas, stifled by contractual proprietary restrictions, inhibited by risk appetite to working with local actors and failing to identify issues in the wider ecosystem to support. A continuation of the orthodoxy of international donors supporting a national, government-led system will be ineffective and is likely to introduce more tensions and conflict between different communities and areas of control. Donor coordination will also be needed to more effectively link humanitarian cash assistance with social protection and eventually reduce humanitarian needs.

If the social protection system is to be re-imagined along the lines suggested by the conference participants, then donors need to up their game and start working together. In particular, an agreement to support the development of a roadmap for social protection that is Sudanese-led and inclusive of the whole country and operates through local organisations is needed. This represents an opportunity for donors to support a strengthened social protection system with more flexible funding instruments and better information sharing to ensure consistency around aims and objectives across the humanitarian and development spectrum. This is particularly urgent as international ODA continues to diminish.

Source: Author's own

2.5 System Strengthening

Technical barriers such as financial services, need to be strengthened for efficient and effective resource transfers. The formal financial system collapsed at the start of the conflict and has yet to re-emerge. The informal sector (Hawala and local agents) has largely stepped in to enable money transfers including both remittances from abroad and humanitarian cash transfers. However, these are varied in scope, coverage and transaction costs and are likely to be enmeshed to a greater or lesser extent in the war economy. Supporting or strengthening cash transfer infrastructure would enable transfers to take place more efficiently and could be an important way to link humanitarian cash and social protection programmes. Other technical barriers include the more effective management of data, deduplication of registries and interoperability of data systems, including data sharing. Some suggestions include:

- **Mobile money** operated independently by private sector mobile network operators (MNOs) have been effective in transferring cash in other conflict settings such as Somalia, offering efficient transfers that are 'invisible' and hence provide a level of protection for recipients. Re-establishing and strengthening mobile coverage and access to phones is an opportunity to strengthen transfer services in the short and longer term. Complementary efforts at improving digital and financial inclusion would also have positive long-term impacts.
- **Shared payments platforms** have been effective in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon for improved payments efficiencies and cohesion and allowing group negotiations to harmonise and lower transaction costs with larger volumes of transfer. Currently, humanitarian cash transfer providers operate with a large number of financial service providers (for example, the Cash Consortium of

Sudan (CCS) uses 41 FSPs). CCS in collaboration with CGAP is working to implement a common platform (SEND or Shared Network for Distribution) that can enhance humanitarian cash transfers and also provide some building blocks for social protection systems.

» **Market Strengthening**: Markets continue to function across Sudan, albeit with some adaptations and changes internally and cross-border. Again, markets are entangled with the political economy of the war, but nevertheless are an essential lifeline together with money transfer services for most people. Strengthening markets can be integrated as part of humanitarian cash assistance and other initiatives, providing longer term impacts.

» **Interoperability**: In common with other crises, there are a plethora of beneficiary databases operated separately by each agency that help to reinforce a fragmented approach to assistance. Databases may overlap with overlapping caseloads, creating inefficiencies that can be ill-afforded in the current funding environment. Deduplication of databases can be done if data management systems are interoperable, together with facilitating data sharing, layering of assistance and referrals between programmes such as from short-term humanitarian assistance to long-term social assistance. Collaboration on data management is challenging, especially in a competitive funding context. However, technical solutions exist and donors providing coordinated incentives for improved interoperability can have positive effects. Harmonised data systems are also important for linking humanitarian programming to social protection, both for caseload management and for the eventual development of shock-responsive components of a social assistance system.

Humanitarian cash assistance is providing life-saving support and needs to link up with and bolster emergent social protection mechanisms. Humanitarian cash assistance is necessary at this time in Sudan, but could align with social assistance in the future, and provide support to nascent systems such as through established cash delivery mechanisms and common data management systems.

Social protection is better suited to take on the chronically poor and vulnerable, and as these systems are re-established, the humanitarian caseload can gradually decrease, assuming the conflict stabilises. There will most likely be a need for continued humanitarian response capacity in Sudan for the foreseeable future, but this can be focused on short-term emergency response and in time, be integrated into shock-responsive elements of the social protection system.

Displaced populations can be helped to become more self-reliant and can help build peace. Instances of communities helping themselves and others to get back on their feet can be communicated to other areas of Sudan. Examples include communities working together to access land and farm inputs in order to produce food and recover livestock production. This helps build resilience, make people less dependent on cash and markets, and in some cases help build peace between communities with a focus on interdependence and common interests. A social protection system could help foster these kinds of activities and communicate messages to others.

Adopting conflict-sensitive approaches can help mitigate against the negative effects of contributing to the war economy. The predatory and extractive war economy is deeply entrenched across and beyond the country and is a major driver for the continuation of the conflict. It is difficult for humanitarian and development actors to avoid any contribution to the war economy but a good understanding of the political economy, especially of trade, markets and financial services, is important to identify the least-worst options: in effect, to do *less* harm. Sudan is not one context. It is characterised by diversity, with historically marginalised areas, and different layers of intersecting vulnerabilities. Conflict-sensitive and politically informed programming needs to respond to this reality. This entails understanding how programming design and implementation may positively or negatively engage and interact with community dynamics shaping exclusion along gender, ethnic and other lines; national and localised conflict dynamics and controlling authorities; the war economy (that extends beyond borders); the continuing and shifting large movements of people; and the influential regional geo-politics. Conflict sensitivity needs to be embedded throughout the programme cycle, to identify opportunities as well as risks. Three solutions are suggested:

» Decentralising aid decision-making and investing in community consultations to engage more with local realities, risks and opportunities.

- Employing Sudanese staff in donor, agency and research organisations in decision-making positions, so their knowledge and experience can guide day-to-day conflict sensitivity.
- Involving local actors in conceptualising aid and deciding programme benefits and targeting approach, rather than limiting them to a distribution role. External aid actors need to take that uncomfortable step to widen their networks and build relationships with civil society.

Conflict-sensitive programming needs to be guided by a longer-term vision. This requires a better understanding of the relationship between humanitarian assistance and social protection in protracted crises as well as how to form effective, practical linkages between the two. In the immediate term, one focus may be about ensuring coherent support for displaced, host and returnee populations. Another will be to consider the relationship between social protection and the (re-)building of the social contract in Sudan.

Actors agreeing to adopt joint operating principles around conflict sensitivity, localisation, inclusion and impact would be an important step.

3. NEXT STEPS – A CALL TO ACTION

3.1 Principles

The conference participants developed a set of Principles to help guide the design of a re-imagined social protection system:

a. **Localisation**
   i. Support, empower and complement localised diversity at scale without undermining local structures/ build on the social fabric, don't disrupt it.
   ii. Listen to the people/community-driven and embedded approach
   iii. Local NGO and Mutual Aid groups as part of local SP ecosystem
   iv. Accountability to the people (affected populations)
b. **Coordination, integration and sharing**
   i. Sudanese and International actors should be allowed equal contributions to SP solutions
   ii. Integration: International/ local; formal/ informal
   iii. Enhance coordination and knowledge sharing
c. **Adaptability and flexibility**
   i. Build on what we have: adapt, learn and sharing information
   ii. Adaptable policy on humanitarian programmes
d. **Equity, inclusion and do no harm**

3.2 Sudan Social Protection Alliance

The main recommendation from the Conference is to establish a protected space for Sudanese experts to take the lead in setting the agenda for a re-imagined social protection system. Of primary importance for a new Sudan Social Protection Alliance (SSPA) will be the development of a roadmap for the next six months that adheres to the Principles that the conference developed and agreed upon. Following up on the Foresight analytical approach started at the conference to design operations is recommended.

The **Sudan Social Protection Alliance (SSPA)** is a Sudanese-led initiative addressing Sudan's urgent social protection challenges and a safe space for setting the agenda for a re-imagined social protection system. It serves as a strategic coordination and advisory platform to support conflict-sensitive, equity-driven, localised and domestically owned social protection efforts. The group focuses on developing a Social Protection Roadmap which can serve as a guiding

blueprint for Social Protection in Sudan, integrating multi-sectoral services, fostering innovation, securing funding, and promoting localisation.

The core members include Sudanese academics, practitioners, and technical experts, and private sector representatives with rotating sub-groups specialising in areas like cash programming, disability inclusion, and psychosocial support. Monthly meetings ensure ongoing coordination, with a secretariat facilitating engagement and reporting.

Guided by the principles of **localisation, coordination and integration, conflict-sensitivity and adaptability, and inclusion and equity and do no harm**, the SSPA aims to also explore the establishment of a national social protection mechanism while generating policy recommendations, stakeholder mapping, and research-driven pilot programs. The duration of this working group is six months. Monthly updates and a learning and accountability report will be generated at the end of this period.

3.3 Break from the Orthodoxy; work differently

In the current context, a re-imagined social protection system should **break from the orthodoxy and seek to do work differently** in ways that are tailored to the differing political and military realities across the country. The conference recommends a number of key elements of what an innovative social protection system would incorporate:

- Domestically-led and people-centred system, utilising the capacities of Sudanese experts and local organisations for design and delivery. Local organisations will need to be able to navigate the complexities inherent in volatile situations with a pervasive and predatory war economy and deliver social assistance tailored to the local context. Local organisations may include state-level authorities.
- The system must work across the whole country and avoid excluding any communities, whether based on ethnicity, access or political allegiance and achieve equal outcomes for all.

3.4 Identify technical barriers to efficiency and effective implementation.

In particular, seek to strengthen electronic cash transfers infrastructure (especially mobile money) including shared payment platforms; work to make registries and databases interoperable or at least able to be deduplicated; and harmonise other aspects such as transfer values.

3.5 Align humanitarian cash assistance with emerging social protection structures and institutions

The humanitarian system can support a developing social protection system and work to integrate with it over time.

3.6 Adopt conflict-sensitive ways of working

…including a good understanding of the political economy of war and how it influences choices regarding financial services and market function. Do less harm.

3.7 Where possible, work to enable conflict-affected people and communities to become more self-reliant

…and reduce tensions/ conflict between communities through common interests such as food production. Seek to reduce the recruitment of boys and young men into militias through alternative economic opportunities than the gun.

3.8 International donors should improve their coordination

…and come together to agree on how to support an emerging social protection system, including the function of the Sudan Social Protection Alliance (SSPA), and the development of a roadmap for the next six months. The Alliance will serve as the only cross-sectoral, expert-led mechanism that will provide strategic coordination and knowledge generation supporting integrated, conflict-sensitive, and equity-driven social protection responses. Recommended responses will be developed along chosen thematic work streams such as localisation, financial inclusion and cash programming, data interoperability/financial services, gender and disability inclusion, and psychosocial support.

Evidence-based and contextually informed technical guidance notes. advisory briefs and policy recommendations will be provided to donors to consider how best to meet needs identified, from range of solutions offered.

This will support the identification of mutually beneficial building blocks to deliver social assistance at scale in Sudan, notwithstanding the fragmented and contested delivery environment. Among other topics, this might usefully include:

- Strengthening the operating environment for financial service providers, mobile money and mobile banking providers.
- Trying to find innovative ways to improve connectivity and electrification to improve market functionality.
- Ensuring greater interoperability between delivery partners on the beneficiary data they hold and the targeting approaches they adopt to identify beneficiaries.
- Agreeing to adopt joint operating principles around conflict sensitivity, localisation, inclusion and impact.
- Developing a shared understanding of market functionality nationwide and integrating a cash-first principle into the humanitarian response.
- Allowing Sudan's extensive academic community to play a role in evaluating what works.
- Understanding where decentralised state-level authorities can play a role in harmonising delivery.
- A protected policy space for Sudanese experts to drive forward the agenda. This would mean donor support to the SSPA and rallying around the strategic direction that it sets.

Source: Author's own

ANNEX 1: CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

#	First name	Surname	Organization
1	Mona	Ibrahim	University Of Oxford
2	Hassan-Alattar	Satti	Independent
3	Khalid	Siddig	International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)
4	Munzoul	Assal	University of Khartoum and Chr Michelsen Institute
5	Basil	Daffalla	Conflict Sensitivity Facility (CSF)
6	Becky	Carter	Institute of Development Studies
7	Medani	Mohamed	Sudanese Development Call organisation
8	Kumiko	Imai	UNICEF
9	Mohamed	Elshabik	Freelancer
10	Muez	Ali	UCL
11	Pia	Jensen	CashCap
12	Erina	Iwami	World Bank
14	Hassan	Ibrahim	NORCAP-CashCap hosted by Mercy Corps
15	Shehab	Salih	MTN FinTech Sudan
16	Kamilia Ibrahim	Kora	Nuba Women for Education and Development Association
17	Amel Abdelfadil	Elradi	Academic/Development Studies and Research Centre
18	Wigdan	Seedahmed	Horizon Blue Ocean
19	Yannick	Chokola	AUXFIN
20	Fatima	Suliman	Cash Consortium of Sudan
21	Elaf	Alnayer	Independent
22	Duncan	Ndlovu	Social Protection Officer
23	Ed	Barney	Social Development Lead, FCDO
24	Sarah	Dalrymple	FCDO
25	Nigist	Abebe	Head of Vulnerability Analysis, UNICEF
26	Reem	Gasim	Mercy Corps - Cash Consortium of Sudan
27	Paul	Harvey	BASIC research
28	Sanchis Peris	Emma	AFD
29	Entisar	Ibrahim	Sudanese Women Coalition for Peace
30	Samah	Osman	Bank of Khartoum
31	Nagwa	Konda	Independent
32	Samia	Ahmed	Sudanese Women Coalition for Peace
33	Gada	Kododa	Researcher
34	Lena	Mahgoub	Planning team
35	Calum	McLean	Planning team
36	Ric	Goodman	Planning team, STAAR
37	Mark	Bradbury	Planning team
38	Jason	Matus	Planning team
39	Joel	Otieno	Planning team
40	Salma	Abdulahi	NRC

41	Jawhara	Kanu	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands
42	Etta Van	Sprang	Consilient research
43	Makda Getachew	Abebe	Regional Social Protection Lead for E and S Africa, UNICEF

ANNEX 2: FORESIGHT SESSION SUMMARY

I. Introduction to Strategic Foresight

What is Strategic Foresight and What It Is Not

Strategic foresight is a disciplined approach to anticipating change, exploring uncertainties, and preparing for multiple future possibilities. It is not about predicting the future with certainty but about building resilience by identifying emerging trends, risks, and opportunities. It moves beyond static planning by challenging assumptions and testing strategies against plausible scenarios. Importantly, it is not crisis management or reactive decision-making; rather, it is a proactive tool to navigate complexity and reduce shock frm -or better yet deal well with- surprise.

Why We Use It for Planning

In a world of volatility, traditional planning often fails to account for disruption. Strategic foresight enables organizations to adapt by framing decisions within a range of possible futures. It shifts the focus from "what will happen" to "what could happen," ensuring plans are flexible and robust. By stress-testing strategies against scenarios, leaders can spot vulnerabilities, seize early opportunities, and avoid being blindsided. It turns uncertainty into a competitive advantage.

Application in Protection and Humanitarian Sector

In turbulent environments -like security or humanitarian response- foresight does not provide fixed answers but builds preparedness. Scenario planning helps anticipate threats (e.g., conflict, displacement) while identifying operational opportunities (e.g., tech adoption, partnerships). By mapping risks and rehearsing responses, organizations can pivot faster when crises hit. For human training, it ensures skills development aligns with evolving needs, such as adapting to AI or climate-driven demands. Foresight is not a crystal ball; it's a toolkit for navigating the unknown with confidence.

II. Workshop Design & Methodology

1. Purpose & Objectives

Primary Goal:
Co-create immediate (0-6 month) social protection interventions grounded in Sudan's complex geopolitical realities while identifying longer-term (24 month) trajectories.

Design Principles:

- **Zone-Specificity**: Acknowledge territorial control dynamics
- **Participatory Prioritization**: Use RICE scoring for objective comparison
- **Foresight Integration**: Connect immediate actions to probable futures

Session Structure:

Phase	Duration	Activity	Output
1. Introduction	15 min	Context setting	Shared understanding of zones/RICE

2. Scenario Analysis	40 min	Group critique of 2 scenarios	Strengthened intervention designs
3. Prioritization	30 min	RICE scoring	Ranked interventions
4. Synthesis	20 min	Cross-group discussion	Consolidated insights

2. Analytical Frameworks

RICE Scoring Model

RICE Criteria	Score Range	Description
Reach	1–5	How many people are directly supported?
Impact	1–5	How meaningful is the change (e.g. lives saved, GBV reduced)?
Confidence	1–5	How reliable is the data, the partners, or the method?
Ease	1–5	How quickly and easily can it start?

Formula:
RICE Score = Reach × Impact × Confidence × Ease

Applied to evaluate 6 core scenarios

III. Social Protection Strategic Planning Session Summary

As part of the conference, a forward-looking strategic planning session challenged conventional humanitarian planning, offering a shift toward adaptive, locally grounded approaches to social protection in Sudan's fractured landscape. The session convened 45 experts, practitioners, and humanitarian actors to co-develop actionable strategies, balancing short-term response with long-horizon planning.

From Uncertainty to Strategic Clarity

Participants entered the room navigating a high degree of complexity, Sudan's polycrisis resisted standard frameworks. But as the session unfolded, integrating signal analysis, scenario testing, and zone-specific prioritization using the RICE framework, the mindset shifted. Early skepticism gave way to engagement as participants translated fragmented realities (mobile banking, youth militia recruitment, HAC restrictions) into coherent strategic scenarios.

Distinctive Outcomes

- **Operationalized ambiguity**: Grounding conversations in tangible signals enabled participants to move from abstraction to specificity. For example, discussions translated into proposals such as mobile cash programs in RSF-held areas or climate-linked vouchers in SPLM-N zones.
- **Exposed systemic gaps**: Scenario-building revealed hidden risks (e.g., biometric exclusion, digital surveillance) and surfaced new opportunities, diaspora-backed parallel systems, adaptive CBO-led delivery models.
- **Anchored adaptive management**: Rather than producing a static output, the session generated a dynamic *Problem Log*, pairing unresolved issues with scenario-tested priorities. One standout: investment in solar microgrids as a hedge against further state fragmentation; the "Patchwork Republic" scenario.

Strategic Implication

The methodology equipped participants with more than insight, it offered a planning lens built for volatility. It enabled dual-focus action: addressing urgent needs in the 0–6 month window while building resilience

for structurally divergent futures. As one participant observed, “This wasn’t a workshop; it was an operating system for action.”

Bottom Line

In Sudan’s volatile environment, fixed plans fail. Strategic foresight isn’t optional, it’s a core capability to unlock local resilience, manage uncertainty, and turn weak signals into decisive pathways.

This session was designed and facilitated by **Wigdan Seedahmed, Horizon Blue Ocean.**

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